

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Ceramic Vases that Contain All the Beauty and Ugliness of US History

by Sarah Archer on June 8, 2016



*Roberto Lugo, "Century Vase III: American" (2015), porcelain, glaze, china paint (photo courtesy of Wexler Gallery)  
(click to enlarge)*

PHILADELPHIA — Of all the astonishing things [Roberto Lugo](#) has done in his career — from creating a DIY potter's wheel and mixing his own clay from dirt in

an urban scrapyards, to creating a new genre of hip-hop-inflected political porcelain — the most radical might be that he is head over heels in love with something rather uncool in the contemporary art world: skill. In his exhibition *Defacing Adversity: The Life and Times of Roberto Lugo* at [Wexler Gallery](#), Lugo's creations are bursting with wit and formal mastery, even as they sport the drips and brush marks of graffiti and liberally-applied glaze. The vessels exude a forceful sense of patriotic bling; for his first solo exhibition in his native city, in a gallery within walking distance of Independence Hall, Lugo celebrates the US founding fathers, public intellectuals of color, musicians, poets, and presidential candidates.

The showstoppers of the group are his riffs on Karl L. H. Müller's [Century Vase](#), a reference that triggers chills of recognition in porcelain nerds, and clearly evokes a sense of historic grandeur for viewers who don't get the specific reference. The German-born Müller (1820–1887) created the Century Vase at the Union Porcelain Works in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, for the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, which was celebrated in grand fashion at the 1876 [Centennial Exposition](#) in Philadelphia. The Vase, of which there are examples at the Brooklyn Museum and the Metropolitan Museum, is festooned with imagery of nature, technology, and scenes from US history. The heads of North American Bison form the handles, and images of telegraph poles, sewing

machines, and other innovations that Made America Great, as it were, frame low relief portraits of the country's first president, George Washington.



*Roberto Lugo, "All about the Benjamins Century Vase" (2016), porcelain, china paint, gold luster (photo by KeneK Photography, courtesy of Wexler Gallery) (click to enlarge)*

Lugo has made several works inspired by the form and iconography of the Century Vase, and in this show, three bold works push the form to its limits. One, "All about the Benjamins Century Vase," features the wry face of beloved local

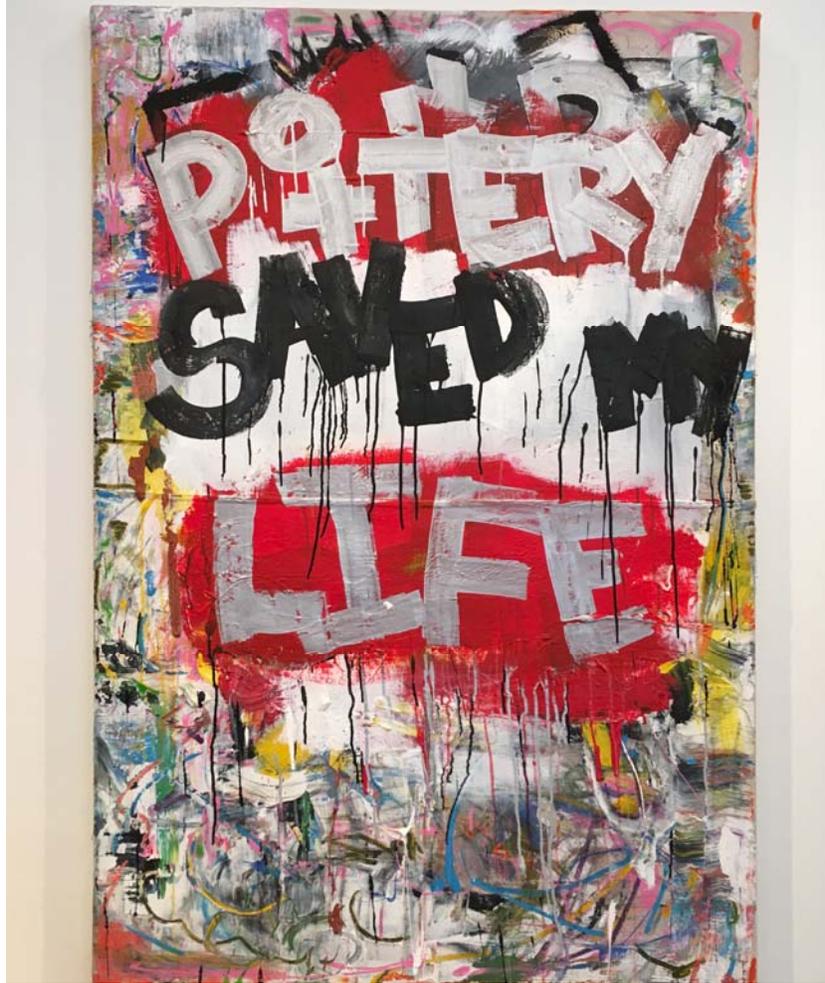
hero Benjamin Franklin with a bandana covering his mouth, the logo of the Wu-Tang Clan, and the words “C.R.E.A.M.” and “Hustle Hard” inscribed daintily around his head. Below him, an inscription reads “All About the Benjamins.” On the other side of the same piece, a self-portrait of Lugo is framed by the phrases “To All the Killers and the Hundred Dollar Billas” and “Ain’t No Such Thing as Halfway Crooks.” In the vessel next to it, “African Refugee Century Vase,” a portrait of George Washington similar to that of the original Vase is framed by the unmistakable pattern of the Confederate Battle Flag, while smaller roundels feature portraits of Erykah Badu, Sojourner Truth, Cornel West, Frederick Douglass, and Lugo himself. At the rim, where the North American Bison would be, are small busts of George Washington and Theodore Roosevelt. Around their necks are silvery chains that could be read as either slave manacles or jewelry; my sense is that they’re deliberately ambiguous. Lugo has played with and reinterpreted the Century Vase in various ways over the last several years. One example from 2015, “Century Vase III: American Refugees,” seems uncannily apt for this year’s vile election season: it features barbed wire, flags, a portrait of Frederick Douglass, and the word “CAUTION” scrawled across the Washington portrait.

Each in their own way, Lugo's Century series and his other vessels — where portraits of Betsy Ross, Joe Frazier, and Edgar Allen Poe join the artist himself in a celebration of great Philadelphians — are deep meditations on American identity, explored with his special brand of sentimental toughness through the lenses of ethnicity, class, and aesthetic know-how.



*Roberto Lugo, "African Refugee Century Vase" (2015) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)*

Lugo was a graffiti artist in Philadelphia long before he ever made a pot. He didn't come to ceramics through the usual channels; there were no bucolic summer camp pottery classes or after school enrichment programs for him to try his hand making pinch-pots, or liberal arts college Art History classes to introduce him to Greek Red Figure vessels and Chinese porcelain. He grew up in Kensington, still one of Philadelphia's roughest neighborhoods, where his young parents, natives of Puerto Rico, struggled to protect him and his siblings from the dangers of their environment while working tirelessly to help them see the richness within themselves. Lugo's artistic outlet was graffiti, and he signed his work with his tag, Robske, a name he still uses playfully in his work today.



*Roberto Lugo, "Pottery Saved my Life" (2015) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)*

"I couldn't make the pottery I make today if I hadn't started doing graffiti as a teen," he told Hyperallergic. Lugo was 25, living in South Florida with a relative and trying to chart a path forward, when he enrolled at a community college and took a ceramics class for the first time. The physical action of learning to master throwing clay on the wheel was a revelation. His teacher's positive feedback was, he recalls, the "first time in my life anybody had ever really said I was good at something." What happened next is as close to an American Dream narrative as

you can get: Lugo was accepted to the Kansas City Art Institute, where he earned a BFA, then Penn State, where he got his MFA, and he now has a tenure-track job teaching ceramics at Marlboro College in Vermont, where he lives with his wife and their toddler son. His work has traveled the world and attracted giddy attention from museum curators and collectors alike. It is no exaggeration, then, to say, as Lugo does in the most moving painting in his current Wexler show, that “Pottery Saved My Life.”

Looking at Lugo’s vessels, one thinks right away of Kehinde Wiley’s [majestic portraits of heroic young men](#) of color, painted in the manner of a Jacques-Louis David portrait, or Lin-Manuel Miranda’s [Hamilton](#) on Broadway. Wigs and waistcoats are the visual signifiers of founding authority in the United States, and Lugo has chosen the perfect moment to introduce both porcelain and pottery to this conversation about our past and present. Like [Fred Wilson](#) before him, Lugo has used the visual language of American decorative arts to make clear and plain the connection between the luxury and resources of the early Republic and the human exploitation that made that luxury possible. It can be painful to face the fact that some of the men we revere for their bravery, Enlightenment views, and political genius also owned slaves, a sin that’s made all the more galling because our democracy was founded on novel ideas of individual liberty and personhood. And this is where the particular brilliance of Lugo’s vessels achieves

the marriage of form with message so beautifully. While their snippets of graffiti, historical iconography, portraits, text, and pattern have all the busy visual intrigue of a Victorian ceremonial porcelain vase, Lugo uses this visual onslaught to reflect our national heritage back to us, refracted with 21st century progressive values, and all the pride, shame, hope, and complexity that comes with the territory of being a US citizen today.



*Roberto Lugo, "All about the Benjamins Century Vase" (2016, detail) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)*

China and porcelain, like silver, have a particular sort of aristocratic (or wannabe-aristocratic) heirloom quality to them. Lugo has remarked that he uses the visual language of heirlooms as a kind of temporal game of telephone. “I often use ornamentation and decoration because I have great respect for the craftsman before me and the approach of inviting someone to a conversation by appealing to their aesthetic interests,” he said. And like Wiley’s paintings or Miranda’s musical, Lugo’s pots are adding voices to the conversation.



*Roberto Lugo, "Big Pun and I" (2015), porcelain, glaze, china paint (photo by KeneK Photography, courtesy of Wexler Gallery) (click to enlarge)*

“I believe ceramics has the opportunity to keep a conversation going long after news stations are done with it,” he said. “For example, I recently painted an urn for the eight lives lost in South Carolina and when I exhibited this pot many of the people forgot that this event happened. Seeing that we have pots from thousands of years ago, I take great pride in knowing I am paying homage to lives lost and important voices who need to be heard for future generations. Although I use my face often, I am not using it for the longevity of my own legacy, but to overcome internal obstacles of inferiority. In the case of the portraits I draw of other subjects, I am very much interested in having these lives memorialized.”

Whether or not he intends it to be, Lugo’s inscription of his own life story into an aesthetic and formal legacy where faces like his are visually absent is a political statement. Today’s ugly rhetoric around immigration circles back again and again to the subjects of ethnicity, nationality, skill, and entitlement. Lugo’s work is vital, creative, smart, ingenious, and novel — all the things Americans love. And by choosing ceramics as his medium, an art form far older than most of our political institutions, he is laying a bet that future audiences (or archeologists) will be receptive to his message, long after Twitter has gone dark.

*Defacing Adversity: The Life and Times of Roberto Lugo* continues at [Wexler Gallery](#) (201 North 3rd Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) through June 11. Lugo will [give a talk](#) at 6pm on Thursday, June 9 at the [Clay Studio](#) (137- 139 North 2nd Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania).